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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

Circular Resolutions

by
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April 25, 2000

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Date: April 25, 2000

Special thanks to Zerbe Sodervick and Susan Farrari-Rowely. They both went beyond their role as professors and had a profound impact on the resolution of my ideas. They have supported my endeavors and encouraged my growth far beyond classroom involvement, and I appreciate their efforts.

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An Introduction

To experience a work of art, as in making love, is to experience human contact; and one can say equally well, the “content” is just the “form” involved, or the “form” is just the “content” involved...” “Painting is a “language,” and it’s only legitimacy is that it can “say” certain things that words can’t. What I can do in words is give you a few associations, a few metaphors, but mainly point out that, as Wittgenstein says, “the instant you reach what is interesting in terms of meaningfulness, words stop.”¹

My thesis titled Circular Resolutions explores the feminine experience in relation to illness and renewal. Illness of the body, or of the mind creates anxiety, which restricts our ability for change and distorts thought even further to create barriers between us and reality. The barriers we build to protect our fragile state of mind become our main obstacles towards recovery. In moments of clarity we realize that we have to make changes in our lives to survive our own fears. Change promotes recovery, which occurs from finding the strength to confront fear and shed the layers of repression. The identification of illness, breaking down these layers of isolation and the dilution of fear are all part of my personal exploration within these paintings.

The content examined in each painting is recycled and used within each series although the nature of my painting style and the application of the

¹ Stephanie Terenzio, Robert Motherwell & Black, (London & New York: Petersburg Press, 1980), p. 40.

pigment varies in form throughout my thesis. I feel the need to express the different aspects of my personality and diversify my approach for the resolution of my ideas. This ultimately, results in an eclectic grouping of images. The process for creating is very important to the development of these works, as each series results from a different level of functioning and control of the process. Some paintings are produced from a premeditated internal exploration, which is executed from memory, creating an intended image. Others rely on a subconscious exploration of the same theme, where chance takes on a greater role in production.

Painting, my daytime activity, releases pent up energy and emotion. The constant application and quick removal of pigment builds up texture which then can be scratched through or eradicated with another layer of paint. The process explores a subconscious reaction to my present emotions and produces a complex surface. This surface is a result of a constant analysis and judgment of each layer constructed. This method of creating and analysis derived from emotion creates turmoil. At the same time my sewn paintings, my evening activity, are constructed using a predetermined image, which frees my mind from such turmoil. The image created is discovered before the actual process is started, leaving my mind detached from the image during the process of creating. The repetitiveness of sewing releases me from internal conflict as process takes over, forging a comfortable union between my daytime and my evening methods of creating.

The Circle

In it lies too the motif of perpetual, uninterrupted activity, of manic restlessness... It's course is occupied in a curious way with

itself: by opening itself and gaining new territory, it nevertheless still ceaselessly circles round itself watches its own past, can never break free from the soliloquy and indeed may not, for by so doing it would lose what constitutes its individuality. ²

I am very interested in the images of science pertaining to how things are constructed, of how they develop and change, and the diagrams documented for visualization. I am attracted to objects and ideas that are precise. The circle, a mathematical and natural phenomenon, always maintains 360 degrees. The circumference always equals the diameter times 3.1416, and the radius is always equal to one half the diameter. The circle is true and constant but never-ending. In most cultures the circle has a very significant relevance to life. It has always been one of the primary feminine signs, as opposed to the line representing the masculine spirit. In many worship based societies the circle was associated with the idea of a protected or consecrated space, in addition to being the shape of equality.

The circle representing the female form has been the main component within my compositions. Its cyclical nature symbolized a universal relationship to life and thought, while the softness of its form is feminine in quality. In earlier works I've used the circle as an element within a figurative framework. The result was less than ideal because the illustrative nature of my style was too literal. Frustrated with my inability to fully express my ideas, I simplified my symbols and eliminated the extraneous elements of the figure. Focus was then placed upon the breast and the pregnant form.

² Hofmann, Werner. Hundertwasser. (Austria: Verlag Galerie Welz Salzburg, 1973), p. 7.

Resulting from this breakdown of imagery into its basic elements, the formal components of my thesis developed. Circles layered upon circles, broken and penetrated by arrows and other spherical configurations, encapsulate the visual repertoire within my pieces. The circle's ability to enclose and protect the interior form became an important aspect of conveying my thoughts for it allowed me to express anxiety visually.

The Arrow

The arrow, a signifier of direction, controls the visual movement within the painting. Its presence played a dominant role in the early paintings of my thesis, while in the later images, the arrow has a softer, more subconscious role. Its universality of meaning and the relationship it has to the medical community fits my purpose well. This symbol also held importance in many cultures, and was often viewed as a phallic symbol as well as a weapon. The strong, ridged, obtrusive nature of the arrow conveys an aggressive presence within the paintings, which is imperative to the overall message conveyed. These arrows penetrate, pinpoint, direct, and connect the source of each image. In later paintings the arrow dissolves its aggressive nature and resolves to suggest a relationship between forms. This relationship becomes a signifier of connection rather than of isolation.

Breast Self Exam Patterns

The Breast Self Exam series is the beginning of my visual testimony of experiences with persons who have had cancer in all its various forms. I have witnessed survivors, have encouraged those struggling to survive, and have watched healthy bodies deteriorate and die. Most importantly I've seen the

courageous strengthen as their bodies weakened. When they passed they left me their strength. I possess their will to survive and attempt to express their experiences in my paintings. I speak of the detection of their illness, the penetration of love in moments of need, and the boundaries they create to protect themselves and their loved ones. I tell stories of healing, whether true or imagined, and express my anxiety over reality.

These paintings based on the BSE patterns circulated by the American Breast Cancer Society are intentionally sterile. The triptych expresses an obsessive display of examination. Each canvas is broken into a 1 inch x 1 inch grid structure overlaying a bright yellow-orange under painting. Within the grid, each 1 inch x 1 inch box holds an arrow, signifying the direction of movement one must follow to examine the breast. The arrows are vibrant in color and each color illustrates a change in the direction of movement. A rich black overpainting surrounds the breast and contains the bright coloration of the background pigment and arrows. *BSE Pattern No.1* (fig.1) examines the breast starting from the mid-section inward, then from the mid-section outward. *BSE Pattern No.2* (fig. 2) searches the breast in a counterclockwise motion around the exterior, moving in towards the nipple. The third pattern, *BSE Pattern No. 3* (fig. 3) examines the breast in an upward then downward movement across the breast.

My intention was to attract attention through the juxtaposition of vibrant colors and the obsessive patterning of movement. The premeditated, sterile quality of the painting invites the viewer to question my intent. This questioning opens the doors for learning, educating those of the importance of examination for the early detection of illness. Although my purpose was to

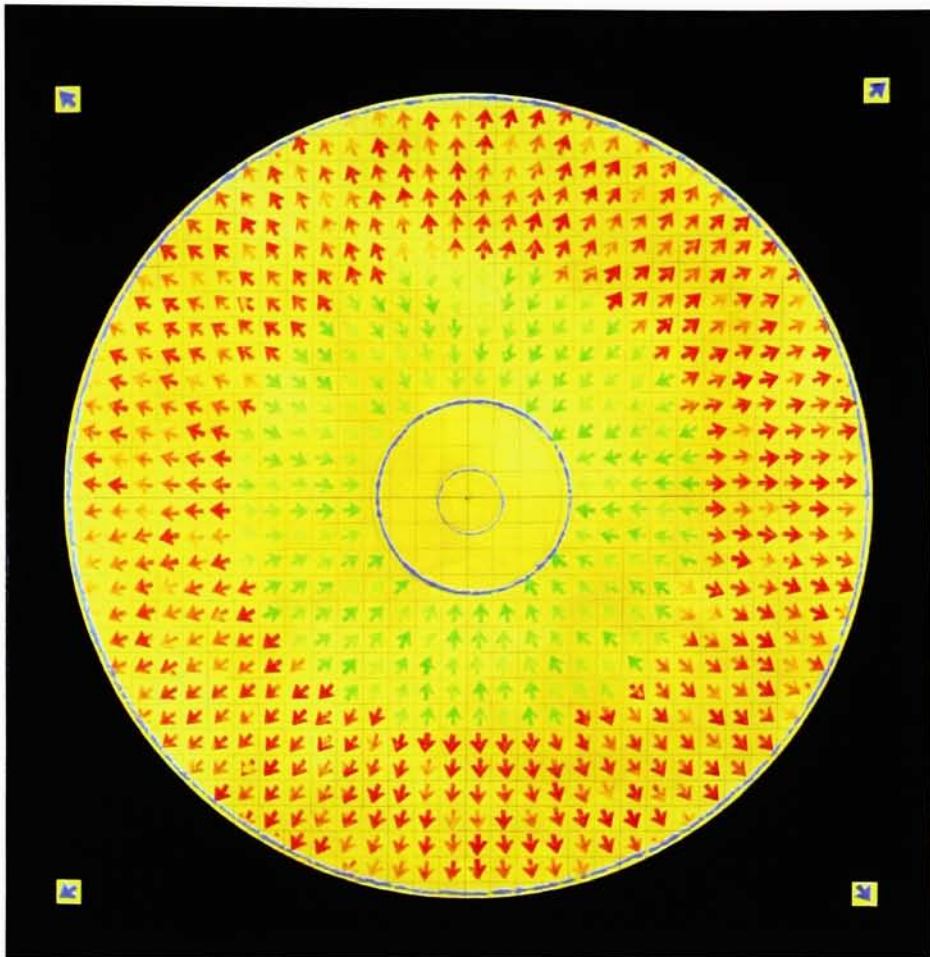


Figure 1 : *BSE Pattern No.1*

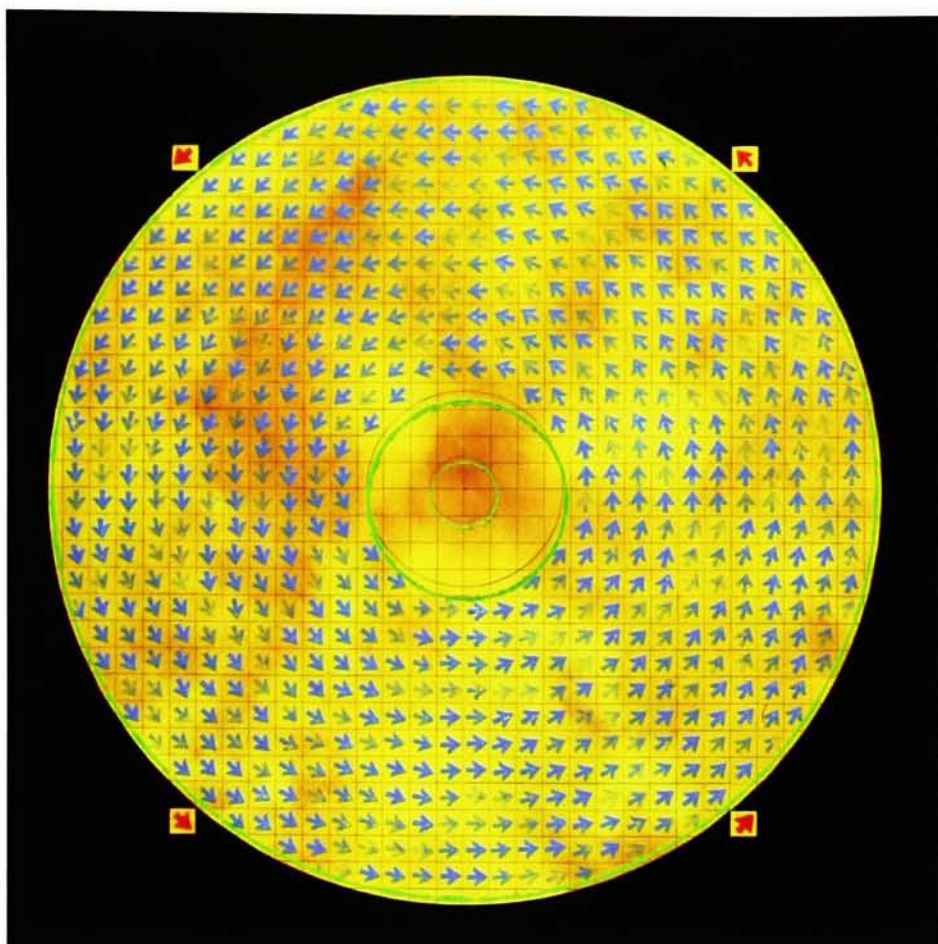


Figure 2 : *BSE Pattern No.2*

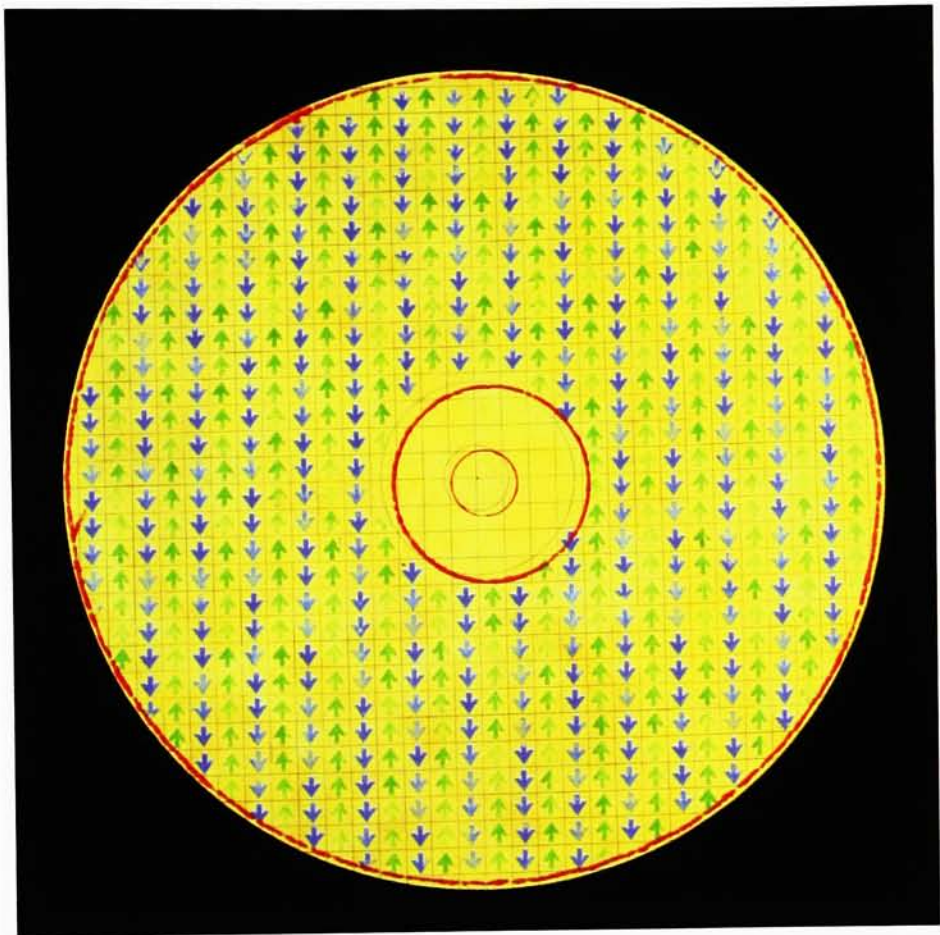


Figure 3 : *BSE Pattern No.3*

encourage all viewers to appreciate the importance of these images, the message is perhaps more poignant to those viewers who themselves have experienced breast cancer (personally or by association).

For both men and women, not being aware of the method of self exam can be detrimental to their health. Statistics show that every year about 180,000 women in the United States are diagnosed with breast cancer. In other words, one in every eight American women develops the illness annually. Most of these women are above the age of forty, although the American Breast Cancer Association encourages women at 20 years of age to begin monthly examinations of their breasts.

Arrow Series

This grouping of paintings uses the formal elements of the Breast self exam series, the circle and the arrow, in a less sterile more painterly manner. The painterly quality of these images and the intricate effects of layering appeal to the viewer on an aesthetic level. There is also a tendency towards describing simplicity and order. The concentric rings that make up the composition of the paintings are a micro section of an actual event. This series represents the internal emotional and physical conflicts between the arrow, the outside element, and the form. Symbolically, the arrow sometimes forceful, sometimes delicate, but always intrusive, bridges a critical relationship within the paintings, as in life. The presence of the arrow signifies the memory of experience, which can blend into the surrounding pigment, but never ceases to exist. The protective rings surrounding the nucleus vary in permeability. This allows visual entrance to some levels of the circular form and conflict with the arrow in others. These protective rings interact with the interfering arrow on a

physical level although they speak of the emotional conflicts an individual has with the prospect of surgery.

The structures of the canvases are built using a circular form underneath the stretched fabric, creating a square painting surface with a raised, internal circular structure. This form adds a third dimension to the canvas and enhances the sense of depth. The surfaces of the paintings are then sealed with polyurethane and silica sand creating a rough surface for supporting pigment. This four-part series results in a stylistic approach to painting, which signifies an action addressing the medical and emotional aspects of discovery and removal of illness. Using the term illness abstractly, these paintings are relevant to many interpretations of sickness.

Untitled: detection (fig. 4), part one of the four part series uses the arrow as a signifier pointing out the positioning of illness. This area, constructed by cutting a hole through the canvas and then attaching a burlap section, breaks the symmetrical balance of the painting. The coloration consists of yellows and bluish greens suggesting the discoloration of an infected area. The arrow directs the viewer from the top down toward the foreign object, the burlap, which is affixed to the image with staples.

Untitled: incision (fig. 5) the second painting in this series was physically slashed by a knife to obtain the affected tissue, and blood flows from within the wound. The arrow enters the composition from the left as a reddish brown stain flows toward the right. The white background allows the under layers of yellows and blues to surface throughout the painting. Thin lines of graphite energy radiate out from the center of the image. Although the subject is strong, the



Figure 4 : *Untitled: detection*



Figure 5 : *Untitled: incision*



Figure 6 : *Untitled: penetration*



Figure 7 : *Untitled: retraction*

image is painted with a softness that aesthetically engages the viewer and dilutes the harsh content.

Untitled: penetration (fig. 6) shoves the arrow upward from the bottom of the painting, penetrating the interior membrane. The internal fluid drips down the penetrating arrow, extracting the alien tissue. The circle of white wash is fluidic and its fragmentation allows exposure of the underpainting. The dark blues of the exterior are set against the bright whites of the large circle surrounding the red interior. The high contrast within the painting results in a bold interaction between elements.

Untitled: retraction (fig. 7), the final movement in the action, pulls the arrow away from the interior of the image. The path of the arrow is partially obliterated during its retraction. A ring of rust surrounds the internal void, suggestive of the dried fluid remaining. The interior is left empty, revealing a foundation of green, unlike the rest of the series, which have highly textural interiors.

Sewing

I became inspired by the concept of hand sewing images on canvas when I accidentally stabbed my hand with a knife. In the emergency room I watched the physician sew together the splayed flesh. The act of closing my skin off from the outside elements to promote healing was a beautiful example of protection, suggesting a solution to my ideas about healing. This act and the resulting healing process reiterated the themes in my thesis and influenced its direction.

Another very important aspect to the sewn canvases has been their association to the female gender. Throughout history sewing was not only used

for utilitarian purposes but also as an acceptable form of artistic expression for women. With the rise of industrialization and inexpensive fabricated clothing, the practical demand for hand sewing dwindled, while the status of women in society rose. Women began to create art beyond the confines of the home and sewing lost the role it once maintained within the female experience. I've borrowed this traditional method of female expression to enhance my own personal style and to empower "woman's work" to rise above a currently diminished status.

Armor Series

Definition- Armor: Covering worn to protect the body against weapons... A quality or condition serving as a defense difficult to penetrate. ³

These images disclose the nature of armor built around illness for the benefit of healing. The sewing procedure is reminiscent of the scabbing over of a wound on a microscopic level. The body regenerates new cells to make itself whole again and those fibers bind together to build a powerful structure of protection, mending the open wound and shielding it from further distress. Each painting is sewn using a predetermined pattern with the intended focus on the center of the canvas.

These sewn paintings are initiated by lightly drawing the desired image on the stretched canvas. Once the image is discovered, it is then methodically sewn. Once the sewing is completed, the canvas is then layered with polyurethane and pigment. The pigment is applied as a wash, and then wiped clean, leaving the stain only in the crevasses I wish to exploit. As a result the

painting appropriates a skin like appearance. These paintings are monochromatic, therefore less devoted to color relationships, with more emphasis placed on the intricate stitchery. The textural aspects of these paintings articulate my thoughts on the fascinating process of healing.

The circle cut out of the center of this painting, titled *Armor No. 1* (fig. 8) allows the viewer to enter into the wound. The wound, physically open to the elements, is inviting the viewer inside. Here we are able to examine a panel of bright orange, representative of soft flesh. The sewn circle enveloping the cutout expresses the buildup of energy around the wound. This buildup of energy is poised in a tightly organized fashion, ready to bridge the gap and close the interior space.

Armor No.2 (fig. 9) the next step in the recovery process closes the wound with a mesh of new growth. The fibers of flesh built-up around the edges of the wound lash out across the open void. These fibers then intertwine with one another to build an impermeable sheath covering the delicate skin of the wound. This causes the skin to become red and swollen, irritated by the scabbing over of new material. All of the energy in this stage of healing is focused on top of the wound unlike the first stage in which the energy is focused around the area of infection.

Armor No. 3 (fig. 10) finalizes the process of healing. The interior once in a state of disruption and turmoil, is now calm and pristine. The energy has receded from the center of the canvas and the renewed skin is revealed. A shadow of the injury remains within the structure of the new flesh, as well as a

³ New World Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. "Armor", Guralink, David.

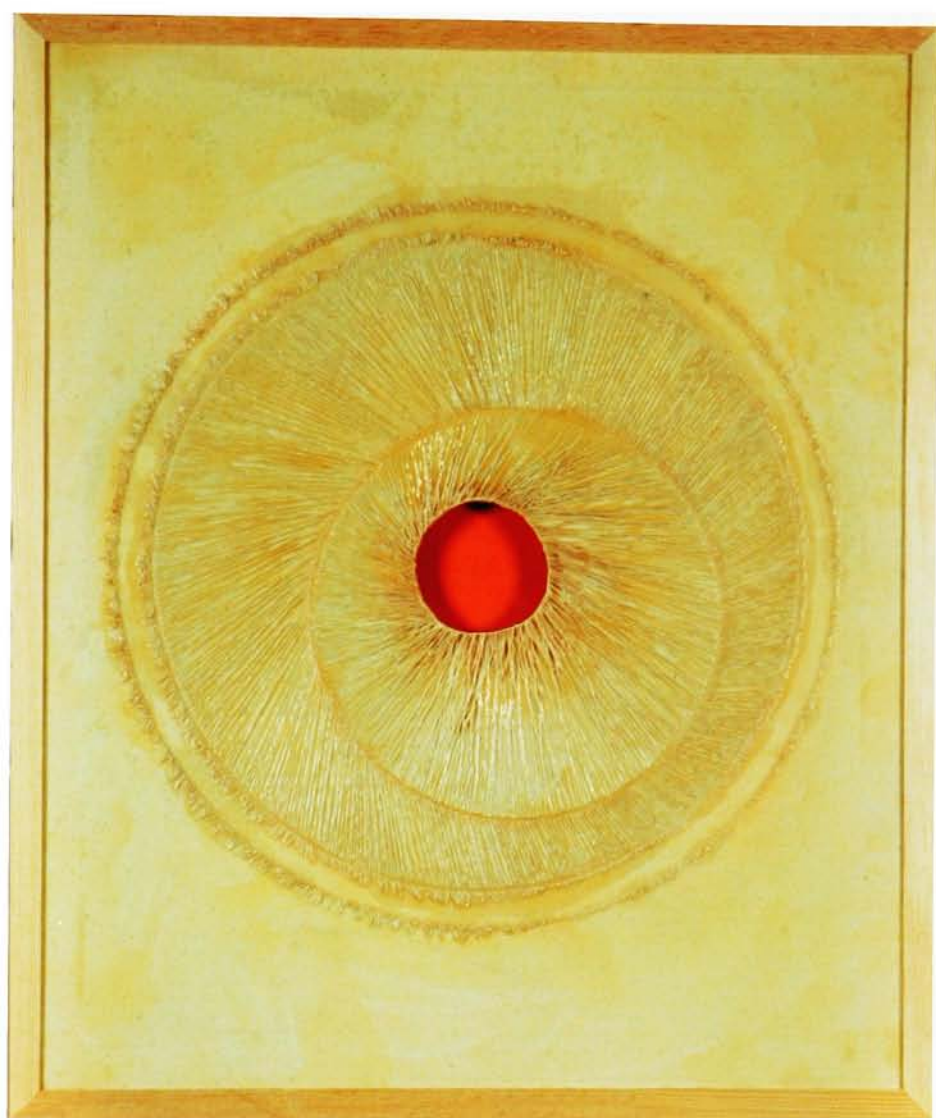


Figure 8: *Armor No.1*

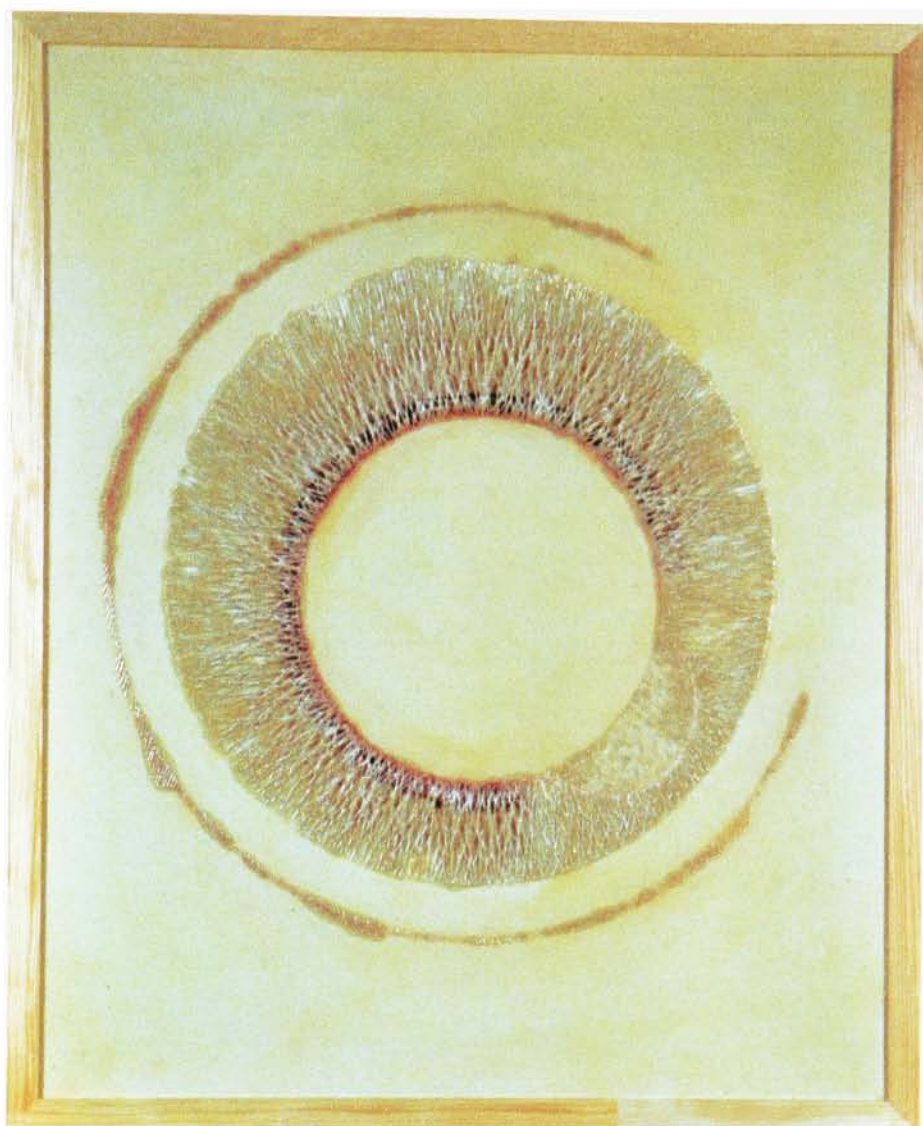


Figure 9: *Armor No.2*



Figure 10: *Armor No.3*

ring of irritation, not yet dissolved. The outside circle has begun to break down and once again allows entrance into the sheltered interior of the form.

Rebuilding Connections

An important aspect to recovery is the rebuilding of broken connections, both connections within oneself and linkages with the external world. These four paintings expose the need for and the want to be part of the whole again. They also begin to break from the strict symmetrical composition of the other paintings. The circle is explored as an imperfect, amorphic, shape forging relationships to human experience, rather than a shape constructed with mechanical precision. This approach to the series was experimental and emotional, rejuvenating my ideas and extending my concepts further than before.

Isolation (fig. 11) is the link between the protection and healing paintings in my thesis. This painting speaks of the necessity for isolation toward the renewal of strength for rebuilding broken connections. The circular shell floats within a white aura, still encasing it in a shroud of protection. The dark atmosphere of the background envelops the circular shell, glowing with renewed energy. A suggestive arrow directs the viewer's attention to the focus of the painting, exposing the new energy from within the interior of the piece.

Connection (fig. 12) breaks pattern from the previous eleven paintings, those that have only one subject. Two separate compositional elements are brought together within the painting. These separate elements share the same pictorial space and are connected by a line attached to their centers. They complement one another in their spatial relationship and coloration. Both are



Figure 11 : *Isolation*

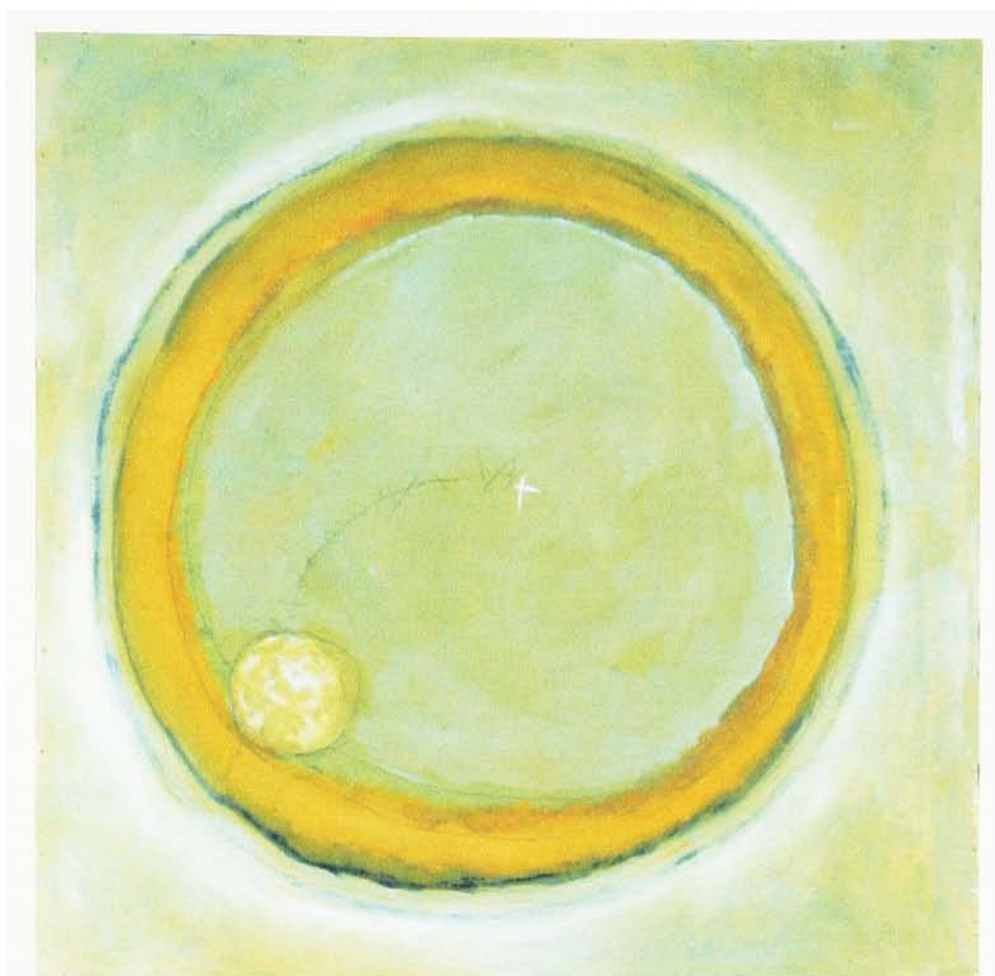


Figure 12 : *Connection*



Figure 13 : *Attraction*



Figure 14 : *Interaction*

variants of white and are painted with broad loose brushstrokes. The smaller sphere sits within the yellow protective barrier of the larger sphere and visually grounds the form. The observed relationship is infused with energy in the form of the yellow ring, which encapsulates both forms.

Attraction (fig. 13) once again suggests the interaction of two circular elements. The larger intricate circle pushes down into the picture plane to address the smaller circle. The interaction between the two shapes is dominated by the weight of the larger circle. Scratched lines of communication connect the separate elements, although a thin red line of hesitation remains as a barrier from complete integration. Both *Attraction* and *Interaction* (fig.14) share a highly textural surface created by attaching layers of paper to the surface of the canvas before painting.

Interaction's surface is enhanced further by the peeling away of the layers of paper, exposing the raw canvas that lies underneath. This painting brings together a communion of elements in such a way as to explore unity between separate forms.

Personal Inspiration

I've always been interested in art that either evokes or provokes emotion. Particularly, I am fascinated by transformative images that almost force us to contemplate our relationship with the external world. Many works of art made by famous artists, contemporary artists and even non-artists have baffled my senses. I continually search for provocative images that have tantalizing and irritating affects, toying with our sensibilities and evocative images that conjure up suppressed energies and emotions. I have also been highly influenced by the

roles women have played within the history of art. Mainly, I have been interested in the reasons why history is seemingly void of "great" female artists.

Subject vs. Producer: Women's traditional role in the Arts

Historically women's major contribution to the arts has been as subject, not as producer. Countless images produced by countless male artists label the female, the feminine in their portrayal as mother, lover, seductress, deceiver, and goddess, most often in the form of the nude. Labeling the female spirit with strict social roles and portraying her so often as *an object* reinforces her inability to perform outside a given context. Art has been defined by men for men and from men using phallicentric language, and patriarchal constructs. There is no androgynous construct set up to define art, since art has always been defined in male gender terms. When women's work is taken into consideration the art is most often regarded only as female work, using gender roles to define the experience itself. Historically there was no reason or room to define anything, in the constructions of ideals, based upon the female experience since it was in a world other than that of the male. In this society where women share the same experiences as men, they are still defined in terms of historic gender constructs. That is where problems arise in deciphering female art. The old forms of analysis are not constructed with a hermaphroditic voice, so a woman's involvement in society has been attributed to them appropriating male traits. Instead, society needs to recognize human traits, not those of an individual gender or race. Gender is better realized as an accomplishment of society than as a law of nature. A quote by Renoir in a letter to a poet friend venting his frustration with women moving beyond their "natural place", is an insightful look into the negative manifestations of patriarchal constructs.

I consider that women are monsters who are authors,

lawyers, and politicians, like George Sand, Madam Adam, and other bores who are nothing more than five legged beasts. The woman who is an artist is merely ridiculous. Gracefulness is a woman's domain, even her duty. I know very well that today things have become worse, but what can we do? ⁴

Although Renoir's ranting is extreme, this passage does show the barriers woman in the arts and other professional fields encounter.

Historically there were no great women artists because institutionally this was impossible; women had no voice in the public arena. After institutions cracked open their doors for women, their rise to greatness was hindered by the social role allocated to them. The development of great artists has been in direct relationship to the acceptance or dismissal of the artist, by the audience. The audience has been manipulated by the institution of power. The realm of power lay within the language of man. Those accepted by the audience or in many cases later audiences, fit the ideal of the public realm. The ambivalence towards women artists rested in the fact that there is no comprehension in the language of man for the experience of the woman.

Artistic Influences

Contemporary artists such as Rothko, Frankenthaler as well as the philosophies of the Dada and Surrealists painters have had a profound influence on my development as an artist. These artists and philosophies have influenced my transition into fine art painting, from a formal education in illustration. As an illustrator I learned the importance of clarity of intent and gained the

⁴ Snyder-ott, Joelynn. "The Female Experience and Artistic Creativity." Women Creativity and the Arts. (New York: Continuum, 1995) pg. 73.

necessary knowledge of the physical to translate form into two-dimensional visual representation. I've internalized the basic technical components of painting and composing, which has given me the freedom to focus more in depth on content. This knowledge I found extremely important, even in the development of non-representational images.

Mark Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler both possess a masterful understanding of color and color relationships. I hope to strengthen my own knowledge of color dynamics and interaction, by studying their explorations. "Constantly exploring, reshaping, and re-evaluating form and color. Rothko gives expression to an unparalleled range of emotions, moods and sensations."⁵ Rothko achieves a sense of luminosity from his use of color, which emanates from within the body of the work. This luminosity he achieves from color interactions is enhanced by a thin line of pigment applied within his rectangles or around their edges. He has the remarkable ability to reduce painting to its essence while conveying complex relationships between color and emotion. Rothko believed that

The progression of a painter's work, as it travels in time from point to point, will be toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea and between the idea and the observer... To achieve this clarity is, inevitably, to be understood. ⁶

His simplistic arrangement of form and color has achieved this clarity of intent, while attaining astonishingly varied results within his severely restricted format.

⁵ National Gallery of Art, Mark Rothko, (Washington DC: Yale University Press, 1986) p. 62.

Helen Frankenthaler's use of color has had a similar affect on my development as a painter. She encapsulated an enormous range of tones within each color she discovers, to the point that her decoratively flat paintings imply the possibility of limitless space. Each color finds its own shape and defines its personal space within the image. Her non-representational paintings evoke emotion and maintain a balance between spontaneity and willfulness and between intuition and calculation. This combination of diverse interrelationships is infinitely difficult for any artist to accomplish.

Conclusion

This body of work is a visual exploration of my experiences with illness, both physical and mental, personally and by association. The circle has remained an essential component within my paintings, and is reflective of the overall nature of the series. The paintings evolves in a continuum, beginning with detection and isolation, traveling through the recovery process and returning to the reconnection of severed ties, broken from isolation. The perfect circle, the amorphic circle, the protective circle, the sacred circle, the clyclical circle and finally the feminine circle are all exposed, revealing my relationship to life and to living. Sewing and painting, two diverse systems for creating, speak to the needs of the imagery and balance my creative energies.

"Making art depends upon noticing things – things about yourself, your methods, your subject matter. Sooner or later, for instance, every visual artist notices the relationship of the line to the picture's edge. Before that moment the relationship

⁶ Ibid., p. 299.

does not exist; afterwards it's impossible to imagine it not existing. From that moment on every new line talks back and forth with the picture's edge." ⁷

This thesis is just one thought-moment that will influence the next, and beyond towards the resolution of my past and future experiences. This body of work reflects just one of many thought-moments, each carrying me closer to my ideal. The most crucial aspect of completing these paintings has been the identification and comprehension of my weaknesses. The realization that my understanding of color is insufficient to exploit its powerful nature, guides my future efforts towards overcoming such flaws.

In conclusion I believe these paintings provoke thought while satisfying my aesthetic needs for expressing visual messages. They encourage me to develop a greater understanding of color relationships and to continue exploring and adjusting my methods of visual expression. I see no purpose in painting that which is not beautiful, or describe ideas that are not evocative.

⁷ David Bayles and Ted Orland, Art and Fear, (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1997) p. 109.

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